

# “Self-Translation And ‘Intratextual’ Expansion In Nabokov’s Autobiographical Texts: A Model For Brodsky’s Memoirs”

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## Abstract

Nabokov’s “triangulation” between Europe and America was characterized by different stages. The aim of this paper is to analyse the elements that led to the writing and re-writing of Nabokov’s memoirs. Starting from the concepts of displacement and misplacement in Brodsky’s most prominent essays, my work will carry out a comparative analysis of the most significant phrases and expressions in Nabokov’s final account of his life, *Speak Memory* (1966), and in *Drugie berega (Other Shores)*, 1954, the Russian version of Nabokov’s first autobiography. It will point out that the former represents a further revision and, thus, an intratextual expansion of the latter, owing to a process of cultural and linguistic enrichment. I will then focus on the features of *Speak Memory* from a semiotic angle. The autobiography mingles elements of the Russian world with the ones of the American context, and using the European setting as a transitional space in-between. Furthermore, the paper will employ Steiner’s theories on bilingual people’s neurological mechanisms, as well as Moro’s recent theories on cognitive neurosciences, to analyse the process which encouraged Nabokov not to relinquish his mother tongue. It will highlight the different “boundaries of Babel” in the work from a neurolinguistic perspective, as borders separating different cognitive areas, thus “forging” Nabokov’s autobiography as a unique output built on different cultural texts and contexts.

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**Keywords:** Nabokov, Brodsky, Self-translation, Autobiography, Neurolinguistics

## Introduction

Much has been discussed and written about Nabokov’s translations and much more can be added, as research and new theories suggest further

ideas and interesting angles. Nabokov's macrotext was "drawn" among different cultural contexts, along a ceaseless journey from Europe to America and back to Europe again. Beside the numerous nabokovian novels, which abound in metaphorical references to the themes of exile and emigration, *Speak Memory* (1966) represents Nabokov's geographical itinerary. It sets his memories within the coordinates of international places, and depicts his numerous movements among phrases and voices from different linguistic and cultural contexts. Although the recent bibliography on the work offers interesting perspectives, such as Petit's, Lyaskovets', Ponomareff's and Mattison's articles on, respectively, photography, time, loss and Aesthetic Bergsonism in *Speak Memory*, to mention some, Nabokov's autobiography still arouses unsolved questions among the international scholarship. Numerous studies have analysed and compared Nabokov's and Brodsky's works who, somehow, shared the same destiny, even though they had different experiences overseas, as Berlina, Diment, and Bethea noted. It is widely recognised that Nabokov's translations and self-translations are often re-writings and expansions, more than "entropic" spaces which destroy their source texts.<sup>1</sup> They are often enriched versions of "previous" texts, in which phrases and sentences in different languages and references to other cultures mingle and "intersect", thus forming what we could call a macrotext of Babel. Starting from the assumption that Nabokov's *Speak Memory* is also *An Autobiography Revisited*, as the subtitle suggests, I mean to consider, in this paper, not only what Brodsky called displacement, as a common condition to all exiles. As the links between linguistics and neurology tend to be closer, I will also try to (re)define the extent to which the neuro-linguistic components might generate the frequent linguistic interferences in the book.

## I.

*Speak Memory* is "interspersed" with foreign words and expressions, by means of which Nabokov, as an exile, expresses his "retrospective and retroactive" ontological condition, to put it with Brodsky (Brodsky 1995, 27). As a matter of fact, in chapter three of his autobiography, Nabokov writes that "The nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood." And " ... Beneath the sky / Of my America to sigh / For *one* locality in Russia" (Nabokov 1966, 73). The memories of his childhood and his past are often "penetrated" by expressions in Russian and in French. In the same chapter, he quotes the French verses that his uncle Ruka wrote in his romance to describe the landscape surrounding Nabokov's country house, such as "*chapelle ardente de feuilles*

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<sup>1</sup> On translation as an act of rewriting the source text, see Godayol 2002, 107.

*aux tons violents*”, “*L’air transparent fait monter de la plaine*” and “*Un vol de tourterelles strie le ciel tender, / Les chrysanthèmes se parent pour la Toussaint*” (Nabokov 1966, 74). Such verses are likewise written in French in *Drugie berega* (*Other Shores*, 1954), the previous Russian version of his autobiography, although they are translated into Russian in the footnotes. Nabokov’s adopted French identity appears even when he describes his family tree and goes back to his ancestors. In particular, in chapter three, he dwells on one of his grandparents, Baroness Nina von Korff, whose problems with a dressmaker in Paris are the pretext to introduce some French vocabulary. The cost of the costumes, which had been especially made for her daughter Maria and her sister Olga for the fancy ball, “represented six hundred and forty-three days ‘*de nourriture, de loyer et d’entretien du père Crépin* [food, rent and footwear]” (Nabokov 1966, 56). However, Maria’s mother rejected her daughters’ dresses because they were “*trop décolletés*” and “*des péronelles*” (Nabokov 1966, 56-57). On the woman’s remark “that the dresses were cut too low for gentlewomen to wear, ‘*se sont permis d’exposer des theories égalitaires du plus mauvais goût* [dared to flaunt democratic ideas in the worst of taste]” (Nabokov 1966, 57). Nabokov quotes the same French expressions in *Drugie berega*, and recounts the episode with the same details (Nabokov 2011, 45).

Another interesting example is in chapter eight. Nabokov depicts his tutor, Lenski, who helped him and his brother with their homework. When Nabokov underlines his strict personality, he recalls his “bracing *diktanti*”, such as the one with the following tongue twister: “*kolokololiteyshchiki perekolotili vīkarabkavshihsya vīhuholey*”, which he himself translates as “the church-bell casters slaughtered the desmans that had scrambled out” (Nabokov 1966, 170). The source text, *Drugie berega*, contains the same phrase, but it is preceded by a somewhat untranslatable sentence: “*Čto za lož, čto v teatre net lož,*” (my transliteration) that is “What is a lie, it is not a lie in a theatre” (Nabokov 2011, 153). The alliterative effect, as well as the contextualization of the word “lie” in a theatre, seems to emphasize Nabokov’s “doubleness”, his different cultural and linguistic selves which alternate and mingle, thus making it more difficult to grasp his real identity. As Nabokov identifies himself with diverse linguistic contexts, he acts different parts, like in a theatre. Owing to the fact that a lie is not a lie in a theatre, Nabokov conveys that a Russian expression may not have sense in English and vice versa, as in the case of his tutor Lenski’s *diktanti*. What is nonsense in a language, may find its own contextualization in another one. Nabokov’s different selves tend to emerge more frequently in *Speak Memory* than in *Drugie berega*, since the former, as a revisitation of the latter, includes more expansions and explanations in Russian and in French. In his English memories, he recalls the day when he met Uncle Konstantin at

Victoria Station in London and his father repeating “Mī v Anglii, mī v Anglii [We are in England]” (Nabokov 1966, 60). It is interesting to point out that this event is not told, or even mentioned, in *Drugie berega*, where Nabokov tells likewise about his uncle’s vicissitudes before his transfer to England, but skips his family’s encounter with Konstantin at Victoria Station in 1919. It appears that Nabokov’s multifaceted linguistic identity revealed itself more clearly as the years went by.

We could proceed with manifold examples of Russian and French vocabulary, but at this point I think it necessary to pinpoint the elements at the root of this multilingual style. Nabokov’s ever “evasive” condition of his “trilingualism” is confirmed, in *Strong Opinion* (1990), by his answer to the question “Which of the languages you speak do you consider the most beautiful?”. Nabokov’s reply is emblematic: “My head says English, my heart, Russian, my ear, French” (Nabokov 1990, 49). His words turn out to be very interesting if we analyse multilingualism beyond the borders of the geographical and political contexts. Such a statement, whose philosophical overtone can be traced back to Blaise Pascal, places English and Russian into two opposite areas of the body. As a result, English represents the language of reason, of rationality, whose use is aimed at everyday communication during his endless exile, whereas Russian, Nabokov’s native tongue, is the language of passion, of spontaneity. The former is the language of his adulthood, the language of survival in a foreign context, as well as a “protecting mask” in the unknown world of emigration. The latter is the language of childhood and memory, and takes with it the hidden world of his real identity. Being placed midway, French is a “neutral” language, in that it is perceived both by means of his head and his heart. On the one hand, it is the language of the mask, like English, as it is a means of communication in a foreign country. On the other hand, it is somehow an emotional language, owing to its historical links to Nabokov’s mother tongue. In virtue of this, I mean to search for the reasons that induced Nabokov to write in English in a linguistic meta context, which does not lie in the real and tangible reality. In his essay “The Condition we Call Exile”, Brodsky writes that “exile is a metaphysical condition. At least, it has a very strong, very clear metaphysical dimension” (Brodsky1995, 25). Brodsky’s words could be applied to the process of translation of *Drugie Berega*. Such a metaphysical condition emerges in the geographical route which takes Nabokov to another place, not only as a real and tangible place, but also as an imaginary place, characterized by cultural and linguistic clashes. The imaginary place I am hinting at is represented by the anthropological boundaries of Nabokov’s world, as well as by the unconscious areas of his brain, which manipulate the phenotypic elements of his language. The explanation of these linguistic interferences seems to lie at the beginning of his autobiography, in which

Nabokov traces the phenotypic expressions of his language back to the deepest strata of his brain:

Just before falling asleep, I often become aware of a kind of one-sided conversation going on in an adjacent section of my mind, quite independently from the actual trend of my thoughts. It is a neutral, detached, anonymous voice, which I catch saying words of no importance to me whatever – an English or a Russian sentence, not even addressed to me, and so trivial that I hardly dare give samples, lest the flatness I wish to convey be marred by a molehill of sense. (Nabokov 1966, 33)

These impressions are equally expressed in *Drugie berega* and testify to Nabokov's steady communication among his acquired languages.<sup>2</sup> However, the origin of Nabokov's Babel of languages should be found beyond the historical, cultural and social environments that he crossed. It should be searched for outside the sociological contexts that permeated his life, in order to make out the extent to which certain biological and neurological elements led him to use different languages simultaneously in his writing. Considering that most of his stimuli came from the context where he grew up - Nabokov writes in chapter four "I would often be read to in English by my mother" - (Nabokov 1966, 81), as well as from the spaces of emigration that he crossed throughout Europe and overseas, it goes without saying that the outer components exerted a strong influence over his inner neurological mechanisms. As it is known, Steiner, in *Dopo Babele (After Babel)*, examines the implications of Broca's area in the articulation of language and discusses the relationships between the latter and brain damage. The linguist Moro, subsequently, considers the particular processes which occur in the human brain when speaking a foreign language. With regard to Broca's area, he states that it "is also activated in adults who are learning a foreign language" (Moro 2010, 173), and this could be an interesting point to analyse the linguistic and phonetic phenomena of Nabokov's work. As well as Moro analyses such phenomena to go beyond the borders between possible and impossible grammars, Nabokov focuses on the frontiers between the languages he deals with, and expresses his comments by "decomposing" the translated words. When he writes about the Russian meter and versification in chapter eleven of *Speak Memory*, Nabokov "manipulates" some words and splits them, in order to penetrate their real semantic essence. He, therefore, quotes some examples, such as "*ter-pi bes-chis-len-ni-e mu-ki* (en-dure in-cal-cu-la-ble tor-ments)"

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<sup>2</sup> For further details, see Nabokov 2011, 23.

(Nabokov 1966, 220). He even translates some single syllables as compared to their metrical structure:

Despite its great length, a word of that kind had but a single accent of its own, and, consequently, the penultimate metrical stress of the line encountered a normally unstressed syllable (*nī* in the Russian example, “*la*” in the English one). (Nabokov 1966, 220)

The result of the manipulating power of Nabokov’s mind and, therefore, his Broca’s area, is represented by his tendency to compare the letters of the English alphabet to a particular chromatic overtone, which he calls “colored hearing” (Nabokov 1966, 34). He writes, for instance, that “The long *a* of the English alphabet ... has for me the tint of weathered wood, but a French *a* evokes polished ebony” (Nabokov 1966, 34). The association of these letters with darkness goes on with “hard *g* (vulcanized rubber)” and *r* (a sooty rag being ripped)” (Nabokov 1966, 34). He, then, associates *n*, *l* and *o* with white, and passes on to the blue group, embodied by “steely *x*, thundercloud *z*, and huckleberry *k*” (Nabokov 1966, 34). He even perceives an interaction between the sound and the shape of some letters, and this is the reason why he sees “*q* as browner than *k*, while *s* is not the light blue of *c*, but a curious mixture of azure and mother-of-pearl” (Nabokov 1966, 35). The “yellows” are matched with *e*, *i*, *d*, *y* and *u*, the brown group includes *g*, *j* and *h*, and the reds are associated with *b*, *m* and *v*. Nabokov finally coins a symbolic word of his chromatic language, “*kzspygv*” (Nabokov 1966, 35), that is rainbow. In *Drugie berega* the same word is written in Russian as “VĖEPSKZ” (Nabokov 2011, 26), and, like its English translation, it makes no sense. What is curious about Nabokov’s linguistic-chromatic theories is that, as he writes, “The first author to discuss *audition colorée* was, as far as I know, an albino physician in 1812” (Nabokov 1966, 35). This same piece of information is not given in *Drugie berega*.

The pseudo-words that Nabokov works out in the two languages seem to respond to the results of an experiment described by Moro, according to which even pseudo sentences can be endowed with a sense of their own. An illogical sentence like “*Molte grapotrte amionarono*” (Moro 2010, 150), sounds absurd to an Italian ear, but it is still pronounceable and recognizable by an Italian native speaker, owing to the presence of a vowel at the end of each word. There is a layer in the human brain of any Italian speaker which is still familiar with the illogical structures of such a pseudo sentence, in as much as it recognizes some features of the Italian language (the words end by a vowel). A word like *kzspygv*, standing for rainbow, as aforementioned, does not only include the wide range of the polychromatic spectrum, but it also embodies the kaleidoscopic perspective from which a

multilingual author, like Nabokov, looks at an element of reality with an Anglo-American eye. The same perspective is depicted by adopting a different linguistic code in *Drugie berega*, where Nabokov uses the letters of the Cyrillic alphabet to describe the same natural element with a Slavic glance. This semantic explosion, as Lotman would put it, is at the origin of such pseudo-words, and it is generated by the encounter and the clash of different linguistic and cultural worlds.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the explosive process is brought about by the numerous impulses occurring in the linguistic networks of Nabokov's neurological universe, thus augmenting the "intratextual" communication among the different languages and generating new cryptic senses. This would explain the fact that *Drugie berega* and *Speak Memory* are characterized both by a semantic plurality and by an original process of "estrangement", whose "double" narrator splits up the words he uses from different linguistic outlooks. By doing so, Nabokov underscores the time distance separating his past from his future.<sup>4</sup> The frequent use of foreign words in the two texts marks the separation between the two time dimensions, owing to the memories that the French and the Russian words and references conjure up. This leads the author to perceive a sense of increasing distance from his motherland and to recall it. The consequent fragmentation of Nabokov's linguistic identity is generated by the "isolating" action of the different impulses and stimuli stemming from the outer environment. They are, in turn, transmitted and propagated by his central neurological system. In Nabokov's case, therefore, "*Broca's area is just like a hub, the crossroads of several different circuits. Maybe nothing 'happens' there. It could just be an area where many networks converge, for purely neuroanatomical reasons*" (Moro 2010, 158). Different signals are sorted out and conveyed by Nabokov's linguistic epicentre to his outer expressive sphere.

In the light of this hermeneutical approach, we might think that a similar procedure could have "moulded" other emigrants' paths, in particular Brodsky's, who "trod" upon Nabokov's route, despite the different circumstances. Brodsky, like Nabokov, turns to his adopted language to write his memories and may have been influenced by his predecessor. As it has been stated by the international scholarship, the two artists' use of their second language to describe their past, often set in Russia, is probably due to historical and political reasons. From Nabokov's and Brodsky's perspectives, English is the language of objectivity and freedom at the same time. It allows them to describe and look at their yesteryear from a detached outlook,

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<sup>3</sup> On the semiotic issues related to the encounter and clash of different cultural and linguistic contexts, see Lotman 1993, 87-88.

<sup>4</sup> See Nikolina 1999, 77-78.

without the emotional involvement that the use of their mother tongue could entail.<sup>5</sup> And yet, there are some differences in their use of English as the language of their bygone times. Nabokov's autobiography, as explained, contains words and expressions in French and Russian; some sections read like mazes in a trilingual world, and the addressee is supposed to face with the hard task not to "get lost" among the multiple intercultural elements. Brodsky writes his essays by adopting Nabokov's same approach, but the use of foreign words is not frequent at all. Like Nabokov, Brodsky makes numerous references to the works of other cultures, but the reader seldom comes across foreign words. Nabokov's expanded and enriched *oeuvre* represents a model for Brodsky, in that the latter recalls his past times by means of his adopted language. However, the sporadic use of foreignisms in Brodsky's accounts can be traced to the further processing of extra cultural information, which led to the assimilation and "domestication" of any foreign interference. Nabokov still dwells on his intercultural route and never relinquishes his inter-linguistic dialogue with the voices from other environments, whereas Brodsky still keeps on communicating with different cultural contexts, but tends to do so in his adopted language. It can be assumed that Brodsky's neurological universe had a different reaction to the "culture shock", and elaborated the surrounding multifaceted reality from an Anglo-American perspective. Brodsky manages his intercultural setting by means of a Darwinian adaptation to the world of emigration, and overcomes the Nabokovian simultaneous presence of different linguistic codes. He absorbs any input from the outer world, and "processes" it as an American speaker.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we may say that Nabokov can be definitely considered Brodsky's forerunner from certain viewpoints. He keeps the different linguistic interferences in his memoirs and considers them as metaphorical anchorages, harbours, which all draw and "map" his international route. Far from considering superior one or the other approach, the two artists' different choice may be linked to the dissimilar reactions of their neurological worlds. Nabokov talks to the foreign contexts through the different impulses propagated by the linguistic areas of his inner world; Brodsky does so by absorbing and levelling the stimuli from the outer world towards a common linguistic code. They both expand their intercultural world: Nabokov employs a centrifugal attitude and chooses to pick his intercultural elements from the different "moorings" of the languages he uses; Brodsky adopts a

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<sup>5</sup> On the issue related to the emigrant artists' detached outlook on their present world, as well as the use of their adopted language to describe their past, see Russo, 2015, 58-59.



centripetal perspective and faces his foreign world within the borders of the Anglo-American world. They are two different responses to the interference of international elements, two different stages of a neuro linguistic reaction to the ever changing ambience.

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